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ABSTRACT

A total of 15 parents participated in interviews about storybooks selected as favorites by their preschool children. Interviews were set up with the parent who said he or she read most often to the child and focused on one of two books the parent stated was either a greater or more enduring favorite. The parents' responses were content-analyzed and reanalyzed; disagreements, all minor among analysts, were resolved by discussion. Responses fell into eight categories: emergent reading behaviors, "deep meanings," intense affinity, interaction, illustrations, participatory qualities of the books, external factors, and the pool of available books. Discussion cutting across those categories focused on children's behaviors, the books as favorites, parents' behaviors, and the books that were available. Findings indicated that all of the children favored particular books and behaved in ways thought to apply to "precocious" readers or exceptional readers only. Parents' answers suggested the importance of parent/child interaction with books and indicated a range of motivations related to this way of spending time with their children. Many children spent considerable time with parents and books, and owned a wide range of books. Favored books were not children's classics but were mostly inexpensive, softbound, easily available books of the sort often found in drugstores or supermarkets. (RH)

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Parents, Children, and "Favorite" Books: An Interview Study

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Research in the development of children who learned to read before formal schooling has implicated parents and children reading together as an important factor (Clark, 1976; Darobi, 1979; Durkin, 1966, 1975; Flood, 1977; Miller, 1969). More recent research observing parents and children reading together has indicated that children show behaviors that can be described as "reading behaviors" during these interactions long before the children are reading conventionally (Doake, 1982; Harkness & Miller, 1982); children affect the interactional patterns of parents (Shanahan & Hogan, 1983); cultural differences can be found in parent-child interactions in

storybook reading (Heath, 1982; Ninio, 1980); and, finally, repeated re-readings of certain books result in children beginning to attempt to "read" the books themselves (Harkness & Miller, 1982; Holdaway, 1979). Sulzby (1981, 1983a) had found that asking five-year-olds to select and read a "favorite" book led to children selecting books that they appeared to have experienced numerous times and with which they showed "emergent reading behaviors," but she did not probe the definition that the children were using beyond asking the children why they liked the books.

The current study focuses on "favorite" books, or books that children ask their parents to read over and over. Many researchers (including Clay, 1979; Holdaway, 1979; Sulzby, 1981; Teale, 1982) have suggested that children's favorite books are important to their early reading development. Thus far, however, no specific attention has been paid to attempting to define what is meant by a "favorite" book for a wider range of children than for the few mentioned in parental anecdotes.

Sulzby (1983c) defined favorite books from anecdotal records as having three characteristics: children asked parents to read the book over and over; they often corrected parents when they deviated from the text as it had been read previously; and they often attempted to "read" the book to themselves, to siblings, to dolls, or to pets. Since these were anecdotes, it was not known whether these characteristics pertain to only a small set of privileged children or to a wide range of children. We suspected that the behaviors were

quite common for children in mainstream highly literate cultures in the USA as research from community and family ethnographies would suggest (Heath, 1982, 1983; Taylor, 1983, forthcoming).

This study was conducted as part of a longitudinal study of the reading behaviors of two- through four-year-old children in a day care setting (Sulzby, 1983b). Part of that study included four sessions at approximately three-month intervals in which children were asked to read two "favorite books" per session. During the first three sessions, books had been planted in the classroom, read repeatedly by teachers, and made available for children's free reading time. Records were kept of the frequency with which children asked for books to be re-read or read them voluntarily. From those records, books were available for choice during the subsequent interview sessions.

For the final session, however, the children's parents were asked to send in two of the child's favorite books from home. The letter making this request specified that the books be current favorites and have been favorites for at least two weeks. The definition of "favorite" was deliberately not stated but used as if parents would understand what was intended (in the nature of research in folk-definitions).

Subsequently, parents were interviewed about these books in an attempt to obtain information in three major areas: (1) What are the parents' and children's behaviors when sharing the books? (2) What are the parents' perceptions of why these books are treated as special, or "favorite"? and (3) What are the characteristics of the pool of books

from which the favorites are chosen?

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study were the parents of children attending a day care center in a Chicago suburb; the children had participated in the last of four studies in Sulzby's (1983b) year-long study of storybook reading attempts by two- to four-year-old children. A maximum of 25 children could be enrolled in the younger children's division at any point in time; for this final study, 19 children were enrolled and took part by reading favorite books sent from home by their parents. Throughout the project, approximately one-third of the children were considered to be from low-income families; one-half were from one-parent families; and one-fourth were from ethnic/national minority backgrounds.

Of the 19 eligible parents, 15 responded to a letter inviting them to participate in an interview about storybooks their children selected as favorites. (Because of school policy, the four who did not respond to the letter were not contacted further; they included two children from minority backgrounds, one of whom had brought obviously new books even though there was evidence that the family had "storybook time" for the child at home). Interviews were set up with the parent who said s/he read most often to the child--14 mothers and one father.

Procedures

Parents were asked to come to the day care center for the tape recorded interview (Appendix A). Parents were reminded of the names

of the two books which they had sent in as their child's favorites for the previous study. The interview focused on the one of those two books which the parent stated was either a greater or longer-lasting favorite.

Analysis

Parents' responses were content-analyzed by the first author. Subsequently, a second scorer was given the category definitions resulting from the content-analysis and re-analyzed the data independently. Disagreements were resolved by discussion; none of the disagreements were considered to be of major importance.

Parents' responses fell into eight categories which are discussed in Robinson (1983). The categories were as follows: emergent reading behaviors, "deep meanings," intense affinity, interaction, illustrations, participatory qualities of the books, external factors, and the pool of available books. For this article, we cut across those categories to focus on four topics: children's behaviors, the books as favorites, parents' behaviors, and the pool of available books.

Results*

Children's Behaviors

Most of the descriptions of the children's behaviors referred to signs of their understanding of and memory for the text. When asked "Does your child read or pretend to read this book?" 13 of the 15 parents indicated that their child did so, giving specific illustrations.** Twelve of the parents also indicated that their

*Parents' responses were multiply-coded and categories have been combined; hence, totals may be more than 100%.

**Response bias toward "yes" answers was checked by examining examples parents gave following the forced-choice questions and other related open-ended questions.

children corrected them when they changed the wording of the book. When asked to describe their child's behavior when sharing the book, 12 of the 15 parents mentioned emergent reading behaviors, including "pretend reading," choral reading, anticipation of story line, and developing into independent, or "real" reading. They also mentioned children attempting to recall every word, as one put it, "word for word" (see Sulzby, 1983a for a discussion of so-called verbatim memory for storybooks). Four parents described their child's dramatic activities in response to the book (i.e., "he goes into flying motions like the character "). These responses were interpreted as indications of their children's attempts to demonstrate understandings apart from verbal responses. In answer to the same question about describing children's behaviors in sharing the book, 13 parents described intense emotional reactions to the book. Interaction is apparently an important part of the sharing of books. While children would pretend to read the books, only a few were described as spending much time alone with the books; in contrast, all 15 parents said that their children preferred to share the book with another person.

The Book as "Favorite"

Parents made reference to the books as having great personal meaning for the child. Describing "What makes the book a special one for your child," five parents mentioned psychological/developmental issues to which they felt their child responded (e.g., "At four and a half, he loves his superheroes."). Five mentioned their child's special interest in the book's topic. Six parents mentioned a

familiarity and/or preference for the character, the author, or story from past encounters. They gave comments like, "She's real into (sic) Sesame Street and . . . the characters." Five parents also described participatory qualities of the books which allowed their child to interact with the book either verbally (books that ask questions in the text) or physically (like pop-up or fold-out books). Three parents mentioned factors external to the book itself, such as a sense of ownership for a child who ordinarily has to share ownership of books with a sibling.

There appeared to be a huge vested interest in the books, as indicated by the number of times the book had been read. The median number of times parents stated the book had been shared with their child was 30, with a range from 10 to "60-75" times. When asked over what period of time the book had been shared, parents responded with a median of 12 months and a range of less than one month to "two to three years." In addition, eight parents showed an obvious weariness in their voices when talking about these books: "I don't mean it in a discouraging way, but I'll say, 'But we've read it so many times,'" and "I'm tired of it, to be honest!" Clearly, some internal desire keeps these children interested even after their parents' tolerance for a given "favorite book" is exhausted.

Parents' Behaviors

Parental behaviors can be inferred in part from two preceding discussions. Specific comments by the parents focusing on themselves included accounts of various attempts to reinforce or extend the

experience. When asked to describe their own behavior when sharing the book with their child, seven parents recounted interactions that might be considered instructional, such as: "[I] point things out--help him understand." Six parents mentioned following the cues of their child: "She acts as teacher and we're her students and we have to be quiet and she reads to us." Six parents said they engage in dramatic behaviors while sharing the book, e.g., "[I] mimic how the characters would say things." Three parents intentionally changed the words of the story, "to see if he's really listening," as one reported.

Pool of Available Books

Children choose their favorites from a very large and personally interesting group of books, according to their parents. Answers to the question, "How many books are available to [child's name] at one time," ranged from 15 to 16 to two to three hundred; the median was 100 books. These answers, like those about the number of re-readings and length of time the book has been favored, appeared clearly to be treated by the parents as estimates; most parents expressed uncertainty in their voices but seemed certain that the actual answers were large in magnitude.

When asked "Where do that books that [child's name] sees come from," 13 parents indicated that they buy them for their child. Other sources included the library (5), siblings (5), school (5), book clubs (4), and grandmothers (2). Parents were asked, "What are some of the things you look for when you select a book for your child?" Twelve of

the 15 parents mentioned their concern for the child's interest or understanding, e.g., books that are "easy to understand. . . if too many sentences, she seems to get bored," and, "He enjoys sensitive books [and] happy endings." Five parents suggested that their values help determine their choices (avoidance of sexism and violence and preparation for the 'real world'). Six indicated that illustrations were important. Other less frequent responses included paying attention to mood, tone, and educational qualities.

The books themselves could not be classified as children's classics in a literary sense. They were not winners of the Caldecott or other such prestigious award. Instead, they ranged from pop-up books to Sesame Street books to Little Golden books to book club selections.*

Discussion

This study confirmed, with a small sample of parents of children from varying backgrounds and abilities, the anecdotal evidence about children and favorite books. These children all favored particular books above others and took part in behaviors, according to their parents, that had previously been speculated to apply only to "precocious" readers or exceptional children. Parents reported that these children would latch onto particular books, would ask for them to be read repeatedly, often to the parents' distress, would correct parents' deviations from the text, and would show emergent reading behaviors with the books in the home setting.

*One child even brought in a computer-generated book with his own name and those of friends and family members inserted in a fantasy tale; his mother indicated that the other book she sent in was more favorite thus we do not have her comments about this particular book.

perhaps omit this note.

Additionally, parents' answers included a wealth of affectively-oriented information hinting at the importance of parent-child interaction with books and about the range of motivations behind this particular way of spending time with their children. One expected set of responses included the comments about weariness with repeated readings of favorites; however, personal reflection on the part of the second author led to the speculation that a motivation for children to begin to attempt to read alone may include parents pushing a child to read a book with which the child is familiar and the parent is weary. (The second author described, "I'm tired of Scuffy the Tugboat! You read it!" as being a not-uncommon parental reaction.)

Many children not only spend a great portion of available time with the parents and books (see McCormick & Mason, forthcoming, for the reported range of time across socioeconomic groups), but they also have a wide range of books from which a few become favorites. The second unexpected finding was that the books were not children's classics but were mostly inexpensive, softbound, easily-available books of the sort often found in drugstores or supermarkets. It appears as if, for this sample at least, that the 'critical merit' of the book from an adult viewpoint does not have much to do with a book's being selected by a child as a favorite. However, the study does not explain the attractiveness of these books other than their availability but certain categories suggest further research. For instance, certain inexpensive books that appear to be far out-of-date with today's youngsters are reported as favorites. It is possible

that parents' fond memories of their own favorites are being communicated to children or that elusive characteristics of appeal to children are found in these books that are hidden to our adult eyes.

This was a simple interview to discover what parents could tell about the folk-defined "favorite book." Finding that parents of a wider range of children also describe behaviors that were heretofore reported only for "precocious" readers raises questions about whether all children can and/or do show the same kinds of behaviors, given the opportunities. Furthermore, this finding makes it more important to continue research in the role of parent-child interactions with storybooks, particularly when those interactions differ from mainstream expectations.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. I understand you brought in (book title) and (book title) as (child's name)'s two favorite books. Is one of these more special than the other?
   If no--
   Which of these two has been a favorite longer?
   The rest of the interview will be in reference to that book.

2. Does (child's name) ever read or pretend to read this book?

3. Does (child's name) prefer to share this book with you or to look at it by him/herself?

4. Can you describe his/her behavior while looking at this book?

5. Can you describe what you do when you share this book with (child's name)?

6. Who usually picks (book title) to share--you or (child's name)?

7. About how many times have you and (child's name) shared this book?
   Over what period of time?

8. Does (child's name) ever correct you when you change the wording of this book?

9. What about the book makes it a special one for (child's name)?

10. Where do the children's books that (child's name) sees come from?

11. What are some of the things you look for when you select a book for (child's name)?
    Which of the things you mentioned is most important?

12. About how many books are available to (child's name) at one time?

The interview questions were designed to induce information about the parent's and child's behaviors when sharing the books, the parent's perceptions of why the book is special, and the pool of books from which this favorite was chosen. The several forced-choice questions were aimed at finding information about behavior that, according to research previously discussed, might be important. This information was sought in questions two, three, six, seven, and eight. Other questions were open-ended. Questions four, five, and nine were designed to allow the parent to generate their own interpretations and conclusions about these books and behaviors around them. Questions 10, 11, and 12 were asked to determine the characteristics of the books available to the child with the assumption that what is available to a child would place constraints around what s/he could choose as a favorite.

The order and wording of the questions was determined in collaboration with the director of the day care center.